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Alec Ryrie

Scripture, the Spirit and the Meaning of Radicalism in the English Revolution

One of the deepest assumptions of Reformation historiography is the division between 'magisterial' and 'radical' reformers. This goes back to Luther's own distinction between himself and the *Schwärmer*, or fanatics. It was a label which he applied liberally, encompassing almost anyone who rejected papal authority but also dissented from his own views. The self-serving nature of that label is a warning that we are in treacherous terrain here. Yet the division has, in one form or another, persisted, perpetuated by confessional traditions in scholarship. In more recent decades, the confessionalisation thesis has served to re-inscribe the magisterial/radical divide, despite the powerful argument advanced by Michael Driedger that Anabaptist communities could, in effect, self-confessionalise. Meanwhile, the tradition that would once have been called Anabaptist historiography has embraced a broader concept of the 'Radical Reformation', and while this has enriched our notion of radicalism, it has retained a sense of it as a thing apart. The supposed gulf between the magisterial and radical – between the respectable and disreputable, the learned and the unlearned, the housetrained and the wild – is only now coming under sustained scrutiny: a scrutiny which is one of the major themes of this book.¹

The historiography of the English Reformation has dealt with radicalism slightly differently: it has generally ignored the subject altogether. There is a tolerably good *prima facie* reason for doing this, which is that Anabaptism as such did not establish any significant presence in sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century England. What little scholarship there is on the subject serves only to emphasise how little real evidence there is.² However, this argument depends on maintaining, almost wilfully, two major blind spots. One is the inescapable explosion of radicalism in mid-seventeenth century England, a subject which is generally excluded from the study of the English Reformation by the simple technique of drawing a sharp period boundary in 1640. The other is the presence even before that date of non-Anabaptist forms of Protestant

1 Alec Ryrie, 'Protestant' as a historical category, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* sixth series vol. 26 (2016), pp. 59–77. Cf. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962); Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age* (Aldershot, 2002).

2 The only sustained attempt to examine the subject, Irvin Buckwalter Horst, *The Radical Brethren: Anabaptism and the English Reformation to 1558* (The Hague, 1972), is widely recognised as problematic.

religiosity which, on the Continent, would be described as 'radical' but which, in the English context, rarely attract that label. The Family of Love, a group whose quietism did not make them moderate, play an acknowledged bit part in England's story.³ But English Puritanism itself contains some alarmingly radical elements. The fringe of antinomians, Judaisers and others are too numerous to be dismissed as eccentrics, and recent historiography has begun to recognise that there is something of a radical tradition here.⁴ Ethan Shagan has teased out elements of economic and political radicalism.⁵ And as Patrick Collinson long since recognised, the semi-separatism implicit in most Puritan nonconformity contained elements which looked startlingly radical, chiefly but not exclusively in its contempt for the national church established by law.⁶

As those examples imply, and as several of the essays in this volume argue, the supposedly sharp magisterial/radical division tends to dissolve into ambiguity when examined closely, in England as everywhere else. It was a distinction drawn, not to describe a theological gulf whose existence was self-evidence, but to create an artificial firebreak in what looked like dangerously undifferentiated theological terrain. That is, it was a political project. Calvin dedicated the first edition of his *Institutes* to King Francis I because of the pressing need to distinguish his Reformation from the one crushed in the self-proclaimed kingdom of Münster the previous year. In 1553, with the survival of the German Reformation still in the balance and with Calvin himself still hoping that Lutherans might be persuaded to accept the *Consensus Tigurinus*, it was necessary for Calvin to be seen to be taking a lead in condemning Michael Servetus: the difference between the two of them was not so obvious that it did not need to be underlined in blood. For the awkward truth was that Reformed Protestantism turned out, from its first generation onwards, to have a recurrent anti-Trinitarian problem. From the Italian *spirituali* to the Hungarian and Polish minor churches through to Remonstrant freethinkers, the question simply would not go away. It was a Remonstrant, Gerardus Vossius, who first proved that the Athanasian Creed was not written by Athanasius. But again, it was Calvin himself who set the pattern for this, for all

3 See, supremely, Christopher Marsh, *The Family of Love in English Society, 1550–1630* (Cambridge, 1994).

4 Karl Gunther, *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England 1525–1590* (Cambridge, 2014). Amongst more specific studies, see in particular Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004); Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge: 'Orthodoxy', 'Heterodoxy', and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester, 2001).

5 See his essay in this volume, and also Karl Gunther and Ethan Shagan, 'Protestant Radicalism and Political Thought in the Reign of Henry VIII', in: *Past and Present* no. 194 (2007), pp. 35–74; Ethan Shagan, 'Clement Armstrong and the godly commonwealth: radical religion in early Tudor England', in: *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, eds Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 60–83.

6 See his *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1982), esp. pp. 269–283, and 'Night schools, conventicles and churches: continuities and discontinuities in early Protestant ecclesiology', in: Marshall and Ryrie, *Beginnings*, pp. 209–235.

that he had the Trinity woven as deeply into his theology as any of his Protestant contemporaries. Diarmaid MacCulloch has drawn our attention to the startling incident in 1537 when Calvin tried to defend the doctrine of the Trinity without resorting to the precedents or terminology of the fourth- and fifth-century Councils, and in the process refused to sign the Athanasian Creed.⁷ If even he could fall into that trap, no wonder others might find their grip on ancient orthodoxy to be shaky.

The same is true of most of the litmus-test issues supposedly dividing magisterial and radical reformers. As the work of Susan Royal has demonstrated in the English context, such unimpeachably 'mainstream' English evangelicals as John Bale, bishop of Ossory, and his disciple John Foxe, whose martyrology was eagerly embraced by the English Protestant establishment, could be found approving of some very radical views on questions such as the legitimacy of oaths, of tithes and of just wars.⁸ Or consider the supposedly litmus-test issue of infant baptism itself. The English Baptists' mixture of magisterial theology and gathered polity could have been designed to make a mockery of the traditional division: their 'orthodox' opponents' attempts to label them as Anabaptists could not disguise the fact that they had a quite distinct genealogy. But they were not the first. Martin Bucer had openly wondered whether infant baptism was Scriptural in 1524: before the Peasants' War, when such thoughts were still thinkable. He concluded that it was prudent and expedient to retain infant baptism, but not, apparently, necessary.⁹ Bucer also flirted with separatism, and indeed the tug towards gathered polities was a recurrent theme in Reformed communities, whether under open persecution or not. It is hard to see any profound difference in social structure between, say, a Calvinist cell church of the era of the religious wars and a Mennonite community.

There is similar ambiguity over magisterial authority itself. It is not only Reformed Protestants who were willing to leave the magistrate behind; that was the most important and most dangerous insight of Spener's Pietism. Likewise, the radicals did not always reject alliance with the magistrate the way they were supposed to, albeit they rarely had the chance. Whatever else can be said about the kingdom of Münster, it was certainly magisterial. So, in aspiration at least, were the English Fifth Monarchists. And there is the tantalising example of Balthasar Hubmaier's state Anabaptism in Nikolsburg in Moravia in 1526–7, which hinged on the conversion of the town's nobleman and its evangelical pastors. It only lasted three months before the Habsburgs crushed it. However, Hubmaier's expressed intention to create 'a Christian government at whose side God hung the Sword' sounds awfully like a magiste-

7 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Calvin: Fifth Latin Doctor of the Church?*, in: *Calvin and his Influence, 1509–2009*, ed. Irena Backus and Philip Benedict (Oxford, 2011), pp. 33–45.

8 Susan Royal, *John Foxe's 'Acts and Monuments' and the Lollard Legacy in the Long English Reformation* [Durham University PhD thesis] (2014); see also her chapter in this volume.

9 Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1992), pp. 52, 54–56.

rial Reformation.¹⁰ Later Anabaptists were embarrassed about it, but if they had had other opportunities to enact territorial Reformations with the aid of princes, are we really to imagine that they would have forgone them?

This focus of this essay, however, is perhaps the most fundamental of the theological issues which supposedly divided 'magisterial' reformers from at least some of their 'radical' brethren: the authority of Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring its interpreters. It examines this subject in the place and time when the magisterial-radical division was most obviously breaking down: that is, revolutionary England in the 1640s and 1650s.

For England's Protestant establishment, trying desperately to shore up its fragmenting identity during those years, this question of Biblical authority became a shibboleth. So, for example, Michael Sparke, a godly bookseller and author of long standing, writing in 1652, lamented that colleagues in the London publishing industry were engaged in a 'trade of . . . Popish, Blasphemous, Conjuring, Hereticall, impious and slanderous Books and Libels, to the dishonour of God, scandall of Religion, [and] the decay of Piety'. He declined 'to Catalogue all, for so I should muster an Army of them, only I will name one *instar onmium*'. That was a formidable challenge to set himself: to choose the one line from one book which was the single most offensive remark yet to be printed in Revolutionary England. But for Sparke, the choice was plain: a passage from the 'Ranter' Abiezer Coppe's 1650 book *A Second Fiery Flying Roule*, in which, as Sparke put it, 'he terms the *Holy Bible* the *Scripturian Whore*'.¹¹

That interpretation of Coppe was not entirely fair, as we shall see, but Sparke was not wrong to detect a radical attitude to the Bible abroad in England which could have been – and, indeed, was – calculated to outrage orthodox sensibilities. The Colchester mechanic Andrew Wyke claimed that the Scriptures were 'no more than a ballad'¹², and one Leicestershire Ranter said that 'the Bible was a pack of lyes'.¹³ In 1654 a Bedfordshire radical defiantly 'said she looked upon the scriptures as nothing, she trampled them under her feet'.¹⁴ In the same year, the prophet Theaurau John Tany went one better and actually burned a Bible on a London common, 'because people say it is the Word of God, and it is not'.¹⁵ And while Quakers did not go in for Bible-burning, they too denied Biblical authority as conventionally understood. By contrast, orthodox Protestant Bibliophiles such as John Owen were going into the lists against

10 James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS, 1976), pp. 141–143.

11 Michael Sparke, *A second beacon fired by Scintilla* (Wing S4818BA. London: for Michael Sparke, 1652), p. 7.

12 Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1972), p. 211.

13 Richard Farnworth, *The ranters principles & deceits discovered and declared against, denied and disowned by us whom the world calls Quakers* (Wing F501. London: Giles Calvert, 1655), p. 19.

14 Edward Bean Underhill (ed.), *Records of the Churches of Christ, Gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham 1644–1720* (London, 1854), p. 90.

15 Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (Oxford, 2016), p. 84.

Quakers and others to defend, not only the plenary inspiration of Scripture, but the inspiration of the vowel points and punctuation of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. It became a central ambition of anti-radical polemics from Thomas Edwards' *Gangraena* onwards to unmask their targets as anti-Biblical. The authors of *Walwyn's Wiles*, a broadside against the Leveller and freethinker William Walwyn, argued that rather than openly denying Scripture, Walwyn cunningly asked questions designed to destroy faith in it, paring away its authority, so that the book of *Psalms* can be disregarded as the self-interested work of a king, and the *Song of Songs* is 'nothing else but one of Solomons ... Rhetorical Songs upon one of his Whores'.¹⁶ These disingenuous questions were, the authors were clear, at best a slippery slope towards atheism, more likely a flimsy disguise for it.

Let us be clear: orthodox Protestants were not wrong to detect a rift between themselves and the radicals on this point. Yet it was neither a gaping nor an unbridgeable gulf, and at some points of the theological landscape it dissipated into little more than a symbolic ditch. Neither side wished to admit it, but they shared a good deal of common ground. The radicals' beliefs about the Bible were, in general, rather subtler than their opponents wanted to believe. The Ranters' blunt blasphemies were rhetorical devices, not theological propositions: these were prophetic attempts to shock their way through the layers of hypocrisy and self-serving falseness that, in their view, had become encrusted onto the religion of their age. The Bible had in the radicals' view become one of the principal barriers with which the pseudo-religious insulated themselves from any danger of real encounter with the Holy Spirit. Coppe did not actually apply the term 'Scripturian whore' to the Bible as such: he used it to describe his own insidious, wheedling inner voice, which quoted texts at him to try to make him ignore his own moral intuition, and to justify not giving money to a beggar.¹⁷ He was giving voice to a wider fear that the Bible could become an obstacle to true godliness, especially when it was interpreted by a self-serving caste of hireling preachers puffed up with human learning but devoid of the Spirit. In that sense, burning the Bible, as Tany did, could be a prophetic act, and as the work of Avner Shamir has shown, it is an act with a long history. Like the infamous Texas preacher Joseph Wesley Mathews, who shocked his congregation in the 1950s by tearing up a Bible during a sermon, this is an attack on conventional religion, not on the Bible as such.¹⁸

In particular, it is an attack on learned authority, the Protestant priesthood which claims to monopolise Biblical interpretation. This is itself another regular theme of the magisterial-radical division. Magisterial Protestantism was a university-led movement whose first father was a doctor of theology who was always quick to insist

16 [John Price or William Kiffin?], *Walwins wiles: or The manifestators manifested* (Wing P3351. London: H[enry] C[ripps] and L[odowick] L[loyd], [1649]), pp. 7–9.

17 Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (London, 1983), p. 102.

18 Avner Shamir, 'Bible Burning and the Desecration of Bibles in Early Modern England' [Roskilde University PhD thesis] (2010); Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America* (New York, 1998), p. 60.

on that status and the dignity that came with it, whereas from the beginning many radicals were outsiders unable or unwilling to compete on those terms, and preferring, as Hans Hut did, to dismiss university theologians as 'Scripture wizards' than to engage with them.¹⁹ Again, however, we would be unwise to take this rhetoric of division literally, and not only because magisterial Protestantism had a fair share of autodidacts too. Nicholas McDowell has shown how often and how subtly the claim to unlearned-outsider status was deployed by those who knew very well how to play by the academic world's rules.²⁰ The point does not apply only to England. Only three leading Protestant reformers of the first generation held doctor's degrees: Luther was one, but the other two were Andreas Karlstadt and Balthasar Hubmaier.

In England, where the academy's grip on Protestant orthodoxy was established quickly, scepticism about the spiritual value of learning was indeed kept at the margins. Christianity's long tradition of unease about the intellect has rarely been as subdued as it was in England in the century before the Civil War. And yet it did not disappear entirely. We can catch its scent thanks to post-Reformation England's one undeniably radical sect, the Family of Love. Like Hut calling his opponents Scripture-wizards, the English Familists called theirs the 'Scripture-Learned'. This was not a compliment. Rather, they meant that establishment theologians were blinded by too subtle and slavish a reliance on Scripture. They themselves interpreted the Bible allegorically, according to what they called the 'paterne of Love', and in so doing claimed that they, not the Protestant establishment, were the true heirs of William Tyndale.²¹

When the scandal over the Family of Love was at its height in England in the early 1580s, 'Scripture-Learned' was the best term of abuse the English language had to offer, but soon a better alternative would be coined: *scripturian*, an ingenious term akin to the nineteenth-century squib *bibliolater* in its implication that while Christians followed Christ, scripturians merely worshipped the text of the Bible. It may have been coined by the playwright George Chapman, since its first attested appearance is in his play *An humerous dayes myrth*, performed in 1597: when a hypocrite piously quotes Scripture, Chapman's mocking protagonist replies, 'O rare scripturian!'²² But if it was original to Chapman, it caught on quickly. Only two years later Robert Persons was disparaging the English Anabaptist Joan Bocher as a 'scripturian' who owed her heresies to too much Bible-reading.²³ It was quickly taken up by other authors, along

19 Walter Klaassen, Frank Friesen and Werner O. Packull (eds), *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism* (Kitchener, Ontario, 2001), pp. 44–6.

20 Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion and Revolution 1630–1660* (Oxford, 2003).

21 Douglas FitzHenry Jones, *Debating the Literal Sense in England: the Scripture-Learned and the Family of Love*, in: *Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 45 no. 4 (2014), p. 915.

22 George Chapman, *A pleasant comedy entituled: An humerous dayes myrth* (RSTC 4987. London: Valentine Symes, 1599), sig G3v.

23 Robert Persons, *A temperate vvard-vvord, to the turbulent and seditious VVach-word of Sir Francis Hastings* (RSTC 19415. [Antwerp]: [A. Coninx], 1599), pp. 16–17.

with *scripturist*, a near-synonym that did not quite have *scripturian*'s abusive edge. Early seventeenth-century English Catholics readily described Protestants as 'hereticall Scripturians running ouer all the corps of sacred Writ', 'peeuish scripturist', 'our verse and lyne-cunning Scripturist', '*Scripturist, Scripturian, doctoresse*'.²⁴ Protestants also began to make use of the term, sometimes to mock Puritans who were guilty of over-simplistic prooftexting or who objected to appeals to learned authority: so we find *scripturian* paired with adjectives like 'ignorant', or 'bould and busy'.²⁵ But it was also used to skewer false and hypocritical religion. Sir John Harington used the term to make a distinction which would have had many later radicals nodding in approval: 'Many great Scriptureans may be found,/That cite Saint *Paul* at euery bench and boord,/And haue Gods word, but haue not God the word.'²⁶ It also began to be said that the Devil is 'a cunning Scripturian'.²⁷

Naturally, though, the word really found its vocation during the Revolutionary years. Coppe was one of the first to conscript it to radical purposes, but not the last. When the sermons of the radical preacher Christopher Goad were published posthumously in 1653, a prefatory poem contrasted him to the preachers of 'a State Religion', who set forth 'the Word of God made so by man'. Goad, by contrast to their 'borrowed fire', had 'Light not acquired, but infused ... The all-inditing Spirit did him fill. ... How sweetly was he ravish'd 'bove the life/Of the Scripturian and the Letter strife'.²⁸ Goad was not quite the pseudo-Quaker that this implies, although had he lived longer he might very well have completed the journey. Certainly Quakers made the same manoeuvre when scorning the university-educated clergy whom they called ministers of the Letter, as distinct from the Word. William Penn defied his prooftext-

24 Humphrey Leech, *Dutifull and respective considerations vpon foure seuerall heads of prooffe and triall in matters of religion* (RSTC 15362.5. Saint-Omer: English College, 1609), pp. 81, 125; William Bishop, *A reproofe of M. Doct. Abbots defence, of the Catholike deformed* (RSTC 3098. [England: secret press], 1608), p. 218; Sylvester Norris, *The pseudo-scripturist* (RSTC 18660. Saint-Omer: English College, 1623), pp. 21, 23; Anthony Hungerford, *The advise of a sonne, novv professing the religion established in the present Church of England, to his deare mother, yet a Roman Catholike* (RSTC 13971.5. Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1616), p. 31 – in this case, the accusation 'Scripturian' is one which Hungerford claims Catholics regularly throw at Protestant women.

25 Andrew Willet, *Loidoromastix: that is, A scourge for a rayler* (RSTC 25693. Cambridge: Cantrell Legge, 1607), p. 58; Richard More, *A true relation of the murders committed in the parish of Clunne* (Wing M2685. London: T.B. for P. Stephens & C. Meredith, 1641), p. 120; cf. Jasper Fisher, *The priest's duty & dignity* (RSTC 10887. London: T. Harper, 1636), p. 11; Christopher Elderfield, *Of regeneration and baptism, Hebrew & Christian* (Wing E329. London: Tho. Newcombe, 1653), p. 265.

26 John Harington, *The most elegant and witty epigrams of Sir Iohn Harrington, Knight digested into foure bookes* (RSTC 12776. London: G[eorge] P[urslowe] for John Budge, 1618), sig. M6v.

27 Bezaleel Carter, *The wise King, and the learned iudge* (RSTC 4693. Cambridge: C. Legge, 1618), p. 32.

28 Christopher Goad, *Refreshing drops, and scorching vials* (Wing G896. London: Giles Calvert, 1653), sig. a2r-v.

ting opponents by observing, once again, that 'the Devil [is] a Scripturian.'²⁹ Samuel Fisher's attack on academic theologians is worth quoting at more length:

Behold O thou *Academical Student* in Divinity, who callest the *Quakers Anti-scripturists*, thou art call'd the *Scripturist*, the *Text-man*, the *Opener-of* that *Book* called the *Bible*, which is a *Book* as much sealed to thy supposed learned self, as to the unlearnedst sort of men in the World, that can but barely read it.³⁰

As his indignation at being called an *anti-scripturist* makes clear, to accuse someone of being a *scripturian* was not to despise Scripture, but to despise a particular way of using it. Witness no less a scourge of radicalism than William Prynne, who, in 1645, characterised his radical opponents' manner of speech thus:

Come you Scripturian, you Scripturemen that must have Scripture for what you will doe; come, I will give you Scripture enough to overthrow your Religion, turne to *Ezekiel etc.*³¹

Prynne's radicals had set off on a new, Spirit-led journey which led them to mock the stodgy theological learning of the establishment, but, like the Quakers after them, they were still brimming with Scripture. Their works were suffused with Biblical quotation and allusion, and their margins bristled with ostentatious Biblical citation. They were still using the Bible – just not in the approved way.

As to how they were using it, we can take the Ranter Jacob Bauthumley as our guide. Deploing his fellow-countrymen's readiness to 'run so often to a great Bible', he added:

I do not speak it to condemn the practise, neither is the fault in the Book, but in mens carnall conceits of it; and seeing men make an Idoll of it, and think the reading and perusing the outward word, is enough to cure all their wounds ... so that as men look upon God outwardly and carnally: so do they have recourse to an outward word, to strengthen their carnall apprehensions.³²

That is an extreme view, but his distinction between the outward and carnal, and the inward and spiritual, speaks to a much wider constituency. He was not alone in calling Scripture an idol: William Erbery remembered an Army chaplain asserting that Antichrist's two great Idols were the flesh of Christ, presumably meaning the Mass,

29 William Penn, *No cross, no crown: or several sober reasons against hat-honour* (Wing P1327. London: Andrew Sowle, 1669), p. 93.

30 Samuel Fisher, *Rusticus ad academicos in exercitationibus expostulatoriis, apologeticis quatuor* (Wing F1056. London: Robert Wilson, 1660), part II, p. 27.

31 William Prynne, *A fresh discovery of some prodigious new wandring-biasing-stars* (Wing P3963. London: John Macock for Michael Sparke, senior, 1645), p. 24.

32 Jacob Bauthumley, *The light and dark sides of God* (Wing B1165B. London: for William Learner, 1650), p. 75.

and the letter of Scripture.³³ *Letter* was a code-word for carnal usage, and its antonym was *word*. This is why George Fox preached that 'not the letter, nor the writing of the Scripture, but the ingrafted Word is able to save your soules'.³⁴ In other words, this is about the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the Bible.

Here the opponents of learned authority had paved the way, because in defying the academic establishment they had appealed to the judgement of the Spirit. The Baptist preacher Samuel How titled his programmatic 1640 attack on learned authority *The sufficiencie of the spirits teaching, without humane-learning*, and accordingly argued 'that men taught by Gods spirit are through it sufficiently made able to know his mind in word'. Learning is not merely immaterial but positively dangerous. How grudgingly accepted that learning had some uses and that the learned could, in principle, be saved – as a camel could, by God's will, pass through a needle's eye – but he thought it much likelier that even Bible-translators would 'fare as it did with those that built Noahs Arke, they made a place of *safeguard* for others, but were *drowned themselves*'.³⁵ Perhaps we might expect that from a man like How, a cobbler with no formal education, but William Dell, the master of Caius College, Cambridge throughout the 1650s, largely agreed with him. Insisting likewise that the Spirit is indispensable to understand the text, he wrote that:

False Prophets, though they speak the *word* of the *letter* exactly, and that according to the very *Originall* ... yet speaking it without the *Spirit* ... doe wholly mistake the *mind* of Christ in *all*, and under the *outward Letter* of the Word of God, doe onely bring in the *Mind of Man*.

And this is so even if they 'preach ... good, sound, and orthodox Doctrine', because 'whoever doth agree with *Christ*, never so exactly in the *Letter*, and yet differs from him in *Spirit*, is very *Antichrist*.' For:

all the *true Religion* of *Christ* is written in the *Soul* and *Spirit* of man, by the *Spirit of God*, and the *Beleiver* [sic], is the onely *Book*, in which *God* writes, his *New Testament*.

It bears repeating: the believer is the only book in which God writes his New Testament.³⁶

33 William Erbery, *The testimony of VVilliam Erbery* (Wing E3239. London: Giles Calvert, 1658), p. 84.

34 George Fox, *A declaration of the difference of the ministers of the word from the ministers of the world; who calls the writings, the word* (Wing F1790. London: Giles Calvert, 1656), p. 12.

35 Samuel How, *The sufficiencie of the spirits teaching, without humane-learning: or A treatise, tending to proue humane-learning to be no help to the spirituall understanding of the Word of God* (RSTC 13855. Amsterdam: [Cloppenburg Press], 1640), sigs D1r, D4r.

36 William Dell, *The tryal of spirits both in teachers & hearers* (ESTC R207233. London: Giles Calvert, 1653), pp. 19–21.

It is not much of a jump from there to Bauthumley's position that we ought to consult that inner New Testament in preference to its print-frozen predecessor. 'I think it not so safe,' he wrote, 'to go to the Bible to see what others have spoken and writ of the mind of God, as to see what God speaks within me. ... The Bible without, is but a shadow of that Bible which is within.'³⁷ That is not too far from the position which Quakers would soon take. The inner light, Richard Farnworth said, 'is not to be found in books nor learning without, it gathers out of all books without, to reading the book of life, within; this light opens all Scriptures.'³⁸ That notion of Scripture as a secondary, external confirmation of a truth which is primarily perceived internally recurs through the radical literature.³⁹ And in the event that there was a tension between these two revelations, most radicals in the end 'tried the Scriptures by the Spirit, and not the Spirit by the Scriptures'.⁴⁰

So far this may not sound as if we have found much common ground between radicals and orthodox Protestants, but it is worth attending to *why* radicals found themselves disavowing conventional views of Biblical authority in this way. Attacks on hypocrisy and the self-serving attempt to place themselves beyond the reach of orthodoxy's principal polemical weapon are only part of the story. A further problem, which surfaces in a series of radical authors and is particularly prevalent in Fisher's disparagement of what he called the 'bare external text of Scripture', was a series of unnerving questions about the Biblical text itself. This was in part a matter of genuine advances in scholarship, bringing long-hidden textual problems to light and making certain discrepancies hard to ignore, but that is not a sufficient explanation for the radicals' troubled preoccupation with the issue. For one thing, the questions they raised were hardly novel. To take the age's paradigmatic Biblical problem, it is not as if no previous Bible-readers had noticed that the book of *Deuteronomy* narrates Moses' death, and that this appears to contradict the claim the Moses was its author. For another, the seventeenth century was not short of well-developed answers to these concerns. Even if you ruled out the fideistic Catholic answer, in which the guarantee of Scripture's authority was the witness of the Church, there were alternatives: the no-surrender textual absolutism of hard Calvinist scholars such as John Owen or Francis Turretin, to which we shall return, or alternatively, the rationalist arguments developed by Hugo Grotius and popularised in England by William Chillingworth, which claimed that there were sufficient mundane reasons to regard the veracity of

37 Bauthumley, *Light and dark sides*, p. 77.

38 Farnworth, *The ranters principles*, pp. 12–13.

39 For Fisher, the role of Scripture is to testify to the inner light: Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (London, 2006), p. 219. For Erbery, who did not live quite long enough to become a Quaker but was plainly well on the way there, 'knowledge of God and of Christ comes not by reading, nor yet by Scripture, but by the Spirit of Revelation, though the Scripture also speaks the same.' Erbery, *Testimony*, p. 106.

40 Underhill, *Records of the Churches of Christ*, p. 74.

Scripture as proven beyond reasonable doubt.⁴¹ So why did some radicals find both that these longstanding problems were newly pressing, and also that the plentiful conventional solutions to them were inadequate?

Very often, it seems, the answer was that they needed to make use of questions about the nature of the Biblical authority in order to advance arguments which might otherwise have foundered on Biblical opposition. The first scholar openly to doubt Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch, the eccentric Huguenot Isaac la Peyrère, did so merely as a spin-off from his highly idiosyncratic messianic theology, which involved multiple human origins: that peculiar doctrine was incompatible with the text of Genesis in several key places, so he needed to question the text's authority. La Peyrère was beaten into print by Thomas Hobbes, whose critique of Mosaic authorship in *Leviathan* was part of his general project to deny any claims to religious authority that were independent of or might be mobilised against the authority of the sovereign.⁴² In both cases the arguments were disturbing, and la Peyrère's, in particular, were taken up and put to more serious use by Baruch Spinoza. But precious few readers shared these idiosyncratic authors' preoccupations.

Spinoza, however, did share one quality with many of the English radicals who preceded him: moral outrage. As the groundbreaking work of Dominic Erdozain has argued, running through Protestant history is a radical critique of the moral framework of Augustinian theology – original sin, predestination, eternal damnation, and, in particular, coercive national churches – which argues that that framework is not only morally unacceptable, but in direct contravention of the Bible's spirit and of Jesus' teaching.⁴³ Unfortunately, those who wished to make such claims needed to face down orthodox critics with proof-texts. Such critics could be fought off line by line, but they could be handled much more comprehensively by redefining the nature of the Bible's authority. Not, it should be stressed, by rejecting Biblical authority altogether, for at the heart of this entire line of argument was the claim to be acting in accordance with the Bible's true spirit. Rather, it was once again a battle of word against letter, this time on a grander scale.

To see this in practice, consider the work of Clement Writer, a Worcestershire clothier and heterodox Baptist who was denounced by orthodox Protestants from Thomas Edwards to Richard Baxter.⁴⁴ The central thrust of Writer's *The Jus Divinum*

41 Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene (eds), *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2006). On inerrancy, see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco, 1979), esp. pp. 148–184; on the Grotian-rationalist argument, see Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY, 2000).

42 Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 219–228; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or, The matter, forme, and power of a common wealth, ecclesiasticall and civil* (Wing H2246. London: for Andrew Crooke, 1651), p. 200.

43 Erdozain, *Soul of Doubt*.

44 Bryan W. Ball, *Writer, Clement* (d. 1659x62), in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online ed., Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30078>, accessed 04/11/16].

of *presbyterie* was his attack against the tyranny of clerical authority. But, as he dug in to defend this position, he found himself having to defy his opponents' methods of Biblical interpretation. Accordingly, the second, much expanded edition of the book concludes with a manifesto for how the Bible ought to be read. The focus ought to be on human needs, not abstract doctrine – providing an independent moral yardstick against which Scripture can be judged, as John Milton argued in a different context.⁴⁵ Therefore, Writer insisted, the key principle to be observed in Biblical interpretation is 'never [to] be induced to understand any Text in such a sence as shall contradict either the Law of Nature written in our hearts, or the love and goodness of God'. Using that principle, he says, merely *doctrinal* questions come to be of secondary importance. For:

A man may maintain an Opinion which in it self is most erroneous, yet he not knowing it to be such, and being unavoidably led into it, may go to Heaven; his Opinion may burn, and he himself be saved, when all *persecuting spirits* (being so contrary to the precept, example and spirit of Christ and the Saints set forth in Scripture) shall ... *fall far short thereof*.⁴⁶

Doctrine was uncertain; Christian charity was not.

If the certainty of charity was one reason for radicals to question Biblical authority, the uncertainty of doctrine itself was another. The more refined Owen's absolutist or Grotius' rationalistic arguments for Biblical authority became, certain English Protestants found it hard to suppress a concern that the Bible was no longer doing its job: that is, it was failing to provide *certainty*, a rock on which faith could be built.⁴⁷ To cite an issue which appears genuinely to have troubled some radicals' consciences: if plenary inspiration was limited to the original holograph manuscripts of the Bible, how can we place any confidence in what Writer refers to as 'the Copies of the Copies', much less in the varied and contradictory English translations? Orthodoxy's attempts to answer such concerns had a way of making matters worse. In 1659 Robert Gell published an 'essay' running to over 800 duo pages crawling through the King James version of the Pentateuch and querying various details of the translation: an exercise which made it rational to conclude that there was no categorical certainty to be found in Scripture.⁴⁸ Once you were inclined to tug at their threads, rationalistic justifications of Biblical authority easily started to look like comfort-blankets of soothing self-delusion which unravelled with alarming speed. Facing such problems, Writer concluded, 'none can be justly blamed, for being unresolved in the premises'. He also raised an unnerving question which was

45 Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, p. 212.

46 [Clement Writer], *The Jus Divinum of presbyterie* (Wing W3725. London: s.n., 1655), pp. 86–90.

47 Popkin, *History of Scepticism*; Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?: The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford, 2010).

48 Robert Gell, *An essay toward the amendment of the last English-translation of the Bible* (ESTC R21728. London: R. Norton for Andrew Crook, 1659).

being asked with increasing frequency. Surely the only reason that most of us tend to believe the Bible to be the unerring Word of God is habit and convention; and if we had been born in Rome, or in Turkey, we would embrace those countries' religions on the same basis?⁴⁹

The point of that much-asked question was not to propagate religious indifference, but the very opposite: to find, beneath the shifting sands of opinion, some real bed-rock of certainty. For some, the probabilistic arguments advanced by the rationalists served that purpose, and in during the English Revolution we find plenty of robustly orthodox Protestants – notably Richard Baxter – following that line.⁵⁰ For others, however, that approach only made matters worse. Samuel How, having made his appeal to the Spirit as opposed to learned authority, asked how believers can know whether they have the Spirit. No argument or reasoned process would serve, he concluded. 'I Answer, that the *Spirit of God is a sufficient witnesse to it selfe, seeing that the Spirit is Truth.*'⁵¹ The same point, essentially, was made at more length by William Walwyn. The authors of *Walwyn's Wiles* characterised his views thus:

I beleeeve it is not the Word of God, and I beleeeve again it is the Word of God; ... the Scripture is so plainly and directly contradictory to it self, that makes me beleeeve it is not the the Word of God; and yet again, all those passages therein that declare the nature of God, viz. his Grace and Goodness to men, I beleeeve are the Word of God.⁵²

They quoted this as they believed that it sounded both shocking and ridiculous, although it perhaps does not seem so to us. What Walwyn himself had said in print two years earlier was that:

I have been most uncharitably slandered to deny the Scriptures to bee the word of God, because I have opposed insufficient arguments produced to prove them such: and because ... I have refused to shew the grounds inducing me to beleeeve them.

He went on to say that he had, indeed, never heard a convincing argument that the Scriptures are the Word of God, and indeed that most of the arguments he has heard weaken rather than strengthen the case. The rationalists were only digging themselves deeper into uncertainty. However, he concluded:

49 Writer, *Jus Divinum* (1655), sig. a1r–v, pp. 66, 71; cf. William Pinke, *The Tryall of a Christians syncere loue vnto Christ* (RSTC 19942. Oxford: John Lichfield for Edward Forrest, 1631), part II, pp. 10–14.

50 Richard Baxter, *The saints everlasting rest, or, A treatise of the blessed state of the saints in their enjoyment of God in glory* (Wing B1383. London: Rob. White for Thomas Underhill and Francis Tyton, 1650), 167–251.

51 How, *Sufficiencie of the spirits teaching*, sig. E2r.

52 [Price or Kiffin?], *Walwins wiles*, p. 11.

I beleeeve them through an irresistible perswasive power that from within them ... hath pierced my judgment and affection in such sort, that with aboundance of joy and gladnesse I beleeeve, and in beleeveng have that *Peace* which passeth all utterance or expression.

This inner power he compares to Elijah's still, soft voice, where the arguments are the earthquake, wind and fire.⁵³

Walwyn, in other words, knew that the Bible was the Word of God, not because he could prove it, but because he just knew. It is no surprise that his critics found this intolerable. No argument of any kind can be grounded on a conviction like this, which is essentially incommunicable. And indeed, while some believers attempted gambits of this kind to stop themselves from sliding further into doubt, and so turned into 'radicals' whether they liked it or not, more conservative or conventional Protestants could be forgiven for assuming that nothing was more likely to spread atheism than this very public dance with unbelief.

The radicals did, however, have a defence against this accusation. For it was they, rather than those like Baxter who had embraced rationalism, who stood most clearly in the tradition of the sixteenth-century reformers. Martin Luther, famously, did not defend the inherited canon of Scripture with the rigour expected of later Protestants, speculating about expelling the books of *Esther*, *James*, *Jude*, *Hebrews* and *Revelation* from the canon. In some cases this was because he did not accept that they were of apostolic authorship – although he was also entirely happy, more than a century before la Peyrère and Hobbes, to conclude that the book of *Genesis* was not written by Moses. In the end, however, Luther's truly serious problem with these books was their content, not their authorship: they did not teach the Gospel of justification by faith as he understood it, which was, for him the irreducible core of Christian preaching. When he complained that the epistle of James 'contains not a syllable about Christ', he meant that that central Gospel of Christ's work was not to be found in it.⁵⁴ In other words, Luther's doctrine of Scripture was in the end a functional one: the text derived its authority from the Gospel it proclaimed. The doctrinal framework, here as in his Eucharistic theology, was the doctrine of the Incarnation. 'The Holy Scripture,' he wrote, 'is God's Word, written, and so to say "in-lettered", just as Christ is the eternal Word of God incarnate in the garment of his humanity'. He even called the Bible 'the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies'.⁵⁵ As such its incidental content is almost insignificant. He summed this up in a much-quoted slogan: Christ is the lord and king of Scripture.

53 William Walwyn, A still and soft voice from the scriptures, vvitnessing them to be the vvord of God (Wing W692. London: s.n., 1647), pp. 11–13.

54 Martin Luther, Luther's Works vol. 54: Table Talk, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 373, 424.

55 Rogers and McKim, Authority and Interpretation of the Bible, p. 78; Brian A. Gerrish, The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority, in his: The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage (Chicago, 1982), p. 55.

This is a high doctrine of Scripture, but in no sense a rationalist one. Scott Hendrix has felicitously described Luther's approach to the Bible thus:

The authority of Scripture for Luther was not like a mathematical theorem which can be proven ... by the use of self-evident axioms. ... Rather ... Luther approached Scripture as we would approach a great work of art.⁵⁶

What was 'self-evident' for Luther was not the logical grounds on which the text's authority rested, but the inherent authority of the text itself.

John Calvin, as a systematic theologian, confronted these issues more rigorously and consistently than Luther, but while his style was more sober, his conclusions do not differ very much. Calvin was happy to accept that the creation story in Genesis did not fit the science even of his own day, and was written to fit what its original readers could understand. He was untroubled by textual glitches in Scripture. He did not simply call out St Luke for getting the name of a high priest wrong or St Paul for writing an almost incomprehensible sentence, but also pointed out that the New Testament writers are sometimes very sloppy in quoting the Old Testament. He explained this by stating, breezily, that 'with respect both to words and to other things which do not bear upon the matters in discussion, [the apostles] allow themselves wide freedom'.⁵⁷ So for Calvin, too, the authority of Scripture was the authority of its core message, not its incidentals. In the *Institutio*, when he came to make the case that the Bible is in fact the word of God, he too took his argument in a direction quite different from that of the later Grotian rationalists: that is, he refused actually to *argue* for the Bible's authority at all. Rather:

We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgements or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. ... Scripture is indeed self-authenticating [αὐτόμωτος]. ... We *feel* [sensimus] that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there, ... a *feeling* [sensus] that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself.⁵⁸

56 Scott Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Aldershot, 1996), ch. 2 p. 147.

57 John T. McNeill, *The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin*, in: *Church History* 28/2 (1959), pp. 131–146, esp. pp. 137–138, 143–144.

58 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 78–81 (my emphasis); cf. John Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis* (Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1559), p. 16. 'Self-authenticating' is perhaps the least inadequate concise English rendering of the Greek αὐτόμωτος: Calvin did not attempt to render it into Latin. As Henk van der Belt's invaluable study of the concept in Reformed theology explains, it has connotations of trustworthiness as well as accuracy, and might be translated more expansively as 'to be trusted because of itself'. Henk van der Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden, 2008), p. 3. Cf. his discussion of how the earlier editions of the *Institutio* made what is, broadly, the same point, but without this specific terminology: pp. 17–21.

Ultimately, then, the Bible's authority is a matter of feeling: of direct, intuitive knowledge rather than of deductive argument. As such, either you feel it or you don't. There is not much to choose between this and William Walwyn's dismissal of rationalistic arguments for Scripture's authority and his appeal instead to the 'irresistible persuasive power' of the text's own still small voice.

I am not, I must emphasise, claiming that the seventeenth century's radicals were somehow the true inheritors of a Reformers' mantle which their 'orthodox' contemporaries had abandoned. Luther knew a fanatic when he saw one, and would have had no trouble placing Walwyn, Writer and any other English radical in that category. My point, rather, is simply that the 'radical' emphasis on the Spirit as an indispensable witness to Scripture was in itself squarely within the 'mainstream' Protestant tradition. That was true in the sixteenth century and remained so in the seventeenth. In 1659, John Owen, Revolutionary England's doughtiest defender of Biblical orthodoxy against radical claims, had this to say on the subject of 'the *selfe evidencing* Efficacy of the Scripture':

Light requires neither *prooffe* nor Testimony for its Evidence. Let the *Sun* arise in the firmament, and there is no need of *Witnesses* to prove and confirme unto a *seeing man* that it is day. ... That which evidenceth not its selfe, is not *Light*.

Like Calvin before him, Owen was careful to explain that he was not claiming that 'all that *read* it ... must instantly, of necessity assent unto it's Divine Originall': many are too blind or befuddled by sin to see light when it is plainly before them. But for those able to see:

The word then makes a *sufficient Proposition* of it's selfe, wherever it is. ... He that hath the *witnesse* of God, need not stay for the *Witnessse* of men, for the *Witnessse* of God is greater. ... They who receive it not on *this Ground*, will never receive it on any, as they ought.

Rationalistic arguments are not denied. But they are very firmly put in their place.⁵⁹

In this sense at least, the English Revolution's biblical radicals were closer to the historic norms of magisterial Protestantism than were their respectable rationalist contemporaries. Their fundamental appeal to the witness of the Holy Spirit was in itself entirely normal Protestantism. As Geoffrey Nuttall long ago pointed out, the argument that Scripture 'carrieth proof and evidence in itself' was not only common currency for seventeenth-century English Puritans, it was in fact 'the essential Puritan emphasis'.⁶⁰ What distinguished the radicals' approach to this matter was not their embrace of the Spirit, but their distrust of rationalist arguments: the 'orthodox'

59 John Owen, *Of the divine originall, authority, self-evidencing light, and povver of the Scriptures* (Wing O784. Oxford: Henry Hall, 1659), pp. 72–3, 77–8, 80, 82.

60 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1946), p. 39.

tradition, by contrast, had increasingly tried to hold the two together, especially in its more public and dogmatic statements. Even Calvin progressively introduced such 'secondary' arguments into his treatment of the subject.⁶¹ By 1561, the Belgic Confession accepted the Scriptures as authoritative:

Not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen.⁶²

The claim of direct witness by the Spirit is 'above all', but it is bundled together with two supporting arguments, an appeal to the church's collective witness, and a rationalistic argument based on the fulfilment of prophecy. By placing the Spirit's witness in the context of these more rationalistic claims, a church could – especially in so public a document as a confession of faith – manage the dangers of enthusiasm or heterodox inspiration.

By the time of the Westminster Confession of 1647, with those dangers even plainer, the balance had shifted still further. Now a small platoon of rational arguments for Scripture's authority was put forward:

The testimony of the Church, ... the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies.

Only then did the Confession add that:

Notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.⁶³

The radicals' innovation was not in making this universal appeal to the Spirit, but in stripping away the rationalistic clothes within which that appeal had been increasingly swaddled.

If this deep congruence between radicalism and orthodoxy has remained obscure, it is largely because none of the parties to the argument had an interest in pointing it out. That task was left to the occasional mischievous troublemaker, such as Henry

61 Van der Belt, *Authority of Scripture*, pp. 38–40.

62 Van der Belt, *Authority of Scripture*, p. 5.

63 Van der Belt, *Authority of Scripture*, pp. 8–9.

Stubbe the younger. In a tricky half-apology for Quakerism written in 1659, Stubbe pointed out that Owen's views were uncomfortably like those of his radical opponents:

Doth not he [Owen] tell them ... that the Onely, publique, authentique and infallible interpreter of the Scripture, is the Spirit that gave it? ... Doth not he say, that it is from the afflatus, or inspiration of the Spirit that the Scripture hath it's Authority, verity, and perspicuity? Doth he not say, that the spirit by internall enlightenings doth lead us into all necessary knowledge? ... It will not be a very culpable tendernes in the Quakers, if they will not hew out broken Cisterns, which Doctour Owen assures them will hold no water.⁶⁴

We should perhaps not read too much into that image of cisterns, which was a fairly widespread one. Yet it is, at least, a striking coincidence that the same image was picked up by no less redoubtable and Biblically orthodox a Protestant than John Bunyan in order to describe his own approach to Scriptural interpretation, in the preface to *The Holy City* in 1665. Appealing for his readers to judge him solely against Scripture, and not against human authorities, Bunyan wrote:

I honour the Godly, as Christians, but I prefer the BIBLE before them. Besides, I am for *drinking Water out of my own Cistern*; what GOD makes mine by evidence of his Word and Spirit, that I dare make bold with.⁶⁵

The point is not that Bunyan's daring and unanswerable appeal to the Spirit's direct witness makes him a radical. It is rather that he speaks for a broader Protestant consensus about the witness and power of the Holy Spirit which underpins orthodoxy and radicalism alike. In this sphere at least, Protestant radicalism is simply Protestant orthodoxy with the guard-rails removed.

64 Henry Stubbe, *A light shining out of darknes* (Wing S6057. London: s.n., 1659), pp. 83–4.

65 Sears McGee (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. III. *Christian Behaviour. The Holy City. The Resurrection of the Dead* (Oxford, 1987), p. 72.